

**Questions by Alessandra Prandin**

During your lecture at the Hammer, I was intrigued by your sentence (referring to the <<< **1972 video of your** “Hands”>>>), that “*the camera couldn’t stand the contrast of black and white*”. How would you apply this idea to your work?

***JW: What excited me about that early video was that every time I played the tape a new visual phenomenon would occur. Wouldn’t it be great if every time you looked at a work of art or a photograph it was remaking itself as you looked at it?***

Has this something to do with the idea of exceeding the limits of the camera?

***JW: When I was younger, that idea (exceeding the limits of the camera) was exciting, because I really didn’t know what a camera did. As I’ve aged, I don’t think about “exceeding” or” limits,” but rather seeing new things that were always implicit in, for instance, the camera.***

What is your relation to technology? I don’t want to make it philosophical, but it seems to me that for example the “Hands” video was playing on the *side effects* of the camera, its mistakes, while now, thanks to digital technologies, Photoshop and so on....everything can be adjusted, no “wrong” pictures are allowed anymore....

***JW: To go back to the work I did when I was in my 20s, technology was just one thing --- trying to understand photography. It’s too bad that what we now call “technology” has become broken up into “programs” or “applications.” But maybe my relation to technology, or yours for that matter, will be different from a child born today for whom there is only technology. The point is, for me, technology was the camera and still is, not the atomized applications.***

I also really liked the watercolor with red apples that you showed during the lecture: a perfect balance of abstraction and representation. ...would you talk more about this, in relation to your work?

***JW: When I was a teenager I was very interested in the American realist painter, Andrew Wyeth. I spent hours looking at his work in reproduction and what I liked about this watercolor is that out of a flurry of gestural brushstrokes the artist has embedded two strikingly realistic apples glistening in late autumn sun. The mix of gestural, material paint and verisimilitude is extremely exciting.***

I’m quite suspicious of the word “abstract” applied to photography...It implies a whole range of thoughts i.e. uncontrolled creation etc. but applied to photography .... Are you comfortable with the definition of part of your work as “abstract”... Choose two or three words that in your opinion better define your practice.

***JW: I'm really happy with the word "abstract." I know some artists, like Walead Beshty, disavow the word "abstract." But I'm of the generation who grew up on this word in common usage. My parents' generation (born in the 1920s) lived through the kind of Abstract Expressionist era, when "abstraction" was a very contested term. For my generation, born around 1950, "abstraction" didn't have any baggage. It was what you hoped you would do. But for younger artists, and maybe for you, the word "abstract" doesn't carry any more meaning or, alternately, too much meaning. Either way, perhaps it can't be used to describe more recent photography. Perhaps, perversely, I like the term because Beshty doesn't.***

At the same time, what is defined as Abstract photography counts more examples on the West than on the East Coast. Is there any specific artist, photographer (California- based) that influenced you?

***JW: I was formed as an artist on the East Coast. My experiences at Carnegie Mellon, in Pittsburgh, where I did undergraduate studies 1969-71, turned me into an Abstract artist. Without going very deeply into my day-to-day biography in those years, let's just say I was extremely influenced by Eva Hesse, Robert Ryman, and Richard Serra, so that when I moved to California in 1971 I was already formed as an artist. One California artist who did deeply influence me was a video and performance artist, Wolfgang Stoerchle. Of course, I was very close to my friends' work: Barbara Bloom, David Salle, Matt Mullican, and of course, Jack Goldstein. Another big influence were visitors to Cal Arts Joan Jonas and William Wegman.***

When I think at the heterogeneity of your work I see a kind of "investigatory concern" binding together all your series. It seems that you are always looking for something, or investigate something new that the camera can reveal or put into light. Is this true? Do you feel this approach in your work?

***JW: I think my work, for me, as I'm making it, is less investigatory than it appears as I present work to the world. My work, for myself, is about memory, feeling, touch --- a sense of my relationship to the physical world, colors, sensations, photographic emulsions, but all in the service of chasing memories, both very distant and recent. This is the least understood part of my work.***

The etymology of the word *alchemy*, means "to separate and to join together elements to transform them into something else". Using this definition as a metaphor, I was thinking at the "Flowers" series and to all those series where you work with different layers of colors and lights, all joined together in the final picture. Is there any place for the unexpected? Or do you know exactly what you want to obtain? Scientific or alchemical?

***JW: You are right to talk about science and alchemy. It's simply that what the world and what you see as scientific experiments are much closer to alchemy, wherein I'm trying to transform my material subjects into thoughts and memories.***

A book of the “Glass House” series has been recently published. It seems to me that this series summarizes in a way, your interests and researches in photography. To mention few aspects; transparency, light, reflections and, of course, color... Would you spend some words talking about this project? And what place does it occupy in your personal research on photography?

***JW: First, the Glass House by Philip Johnson is in Connecticut. That state, where I was born and still continue to make projects, is a little bit of an obsession for me. I did a project on my father’s great-grandmother’s diary, and on my website you can see an ongoing project called “Connecticut Landscape.” (My website address is jameswelling.net) The interesting thing about the Glass House is that (a) it’s in Connecticut and (b) I was able to make multiple trips to visit it in all seasons. My first visit to the Glass House was on a beautiful autumn day. I completely fell in love with what is actually an estate. Erwin Panofsky, in his book “Renaissance And Renascences In Western Art,” talks about how intense landscapes are through beautiful windows. This is what the Glass House does. It completely activates the landscape around it and I think I was trying to do the same thing by photographing with intense colors. Or to say it a different way, I wanted to make very intense the experience of being at the Glass House by adding my own filters. Although most of my pictures of the Glass House are taken on the outside, I like to use the metaphor of the house as lens. Like Panofsky’s window, the Glass House intensifies the landscape. Interestingly, my next project is about my adolescent hero, Andrew Wyeth, who painted those apples. I’ve been traveling down to Pennsylvania and photographing his very monochrome landscape. They’re quite different from the intense, flamboyant color of the Glass House.***

The work at the Glass House represents also your return to video making after a long time, right?

***JW: Yes. In a funny sort of way I went back to some of my early 1970s video techniques, where I walked around with the camera.***

~~What did I see in the show “The city proper” that you recently curated, reminded me of a description of Los Angeles by Mike Davis. He defines Los Angeles as a “strange choreography of the wild and the urban. Do you find this definition accurate to describe your curatorial choices?~~

~~I really enjoy the heterogeneity of the group and the pervasive irony of some photographers. The spectator was invited to go back and forth, from a more historical background to the more experimental expressions of photography that is to say, from Hernandez’s Downtown~~

~~street views to Brandon Lattu's tridimensional photos. As the curator for the show, would you talk more about this?~~

~~Do you feel influenced by the city where you live in? I mean, light saturates every corner of Los Angeles and for the same reason the contrast with the shadow is stronger. Then I think of your "Photograms" or of the "Flowers" series...~~

~~A upcoming show at LACMA will investigate the relation between photography and the plastic arts, sculpture and installation. I have in mind your "Aluminum foil" series or the "Drapes" series: in both projects you work on the quality of the material you use and the arrangement as well. Then comes the photo that isolates the composition and completes the work. Have you conceived these series with this relation in mind? Do you feel it as part of your work?~~

Do you have unrealized projects or series you would like to talk about?

***JW: As I said, I have a couple of on-going projects that have not been shown, that are on my website. And I'm working on this project on Andrew Wyeth and I'm not sure where it will lead. Of course, every artist has unrealized projects and in a sense, they're not new projects but they morph out of older desires and ideas.***

What is the pleasure of a photograph to you? And what part of making photographs is more pleasurable to you? Conceiving the process? The final result?

***JW: That's a great question. I started out as a painter and when I was in my mid-20s, discovered that I really liked photography; you could say it was about discovering the pleasure of photography. Something that I love about photography is that it has the history of the medium embedded in all the materials. And since in my early work, "Diary/Landscape" or my photography of 19<sup>th</sup> Century architecture, those works were concerned with depicting history and temporality, so photography was the perfect medium. A photograph is like a time machine. Something else that I've discovered about photography is that I see the world differently after I've photographed it. Of course this is a truism of all the arts. A choreographer sees movement more intensely after they've created a dance, and I see the world through my photographs, through these intense re-imaginings of the real, in my photographs. If I hadn't been photographing the Glass House, I would not have seen it as intensely as I did when I returned each time to take pictures of it. The photographer's photograph is a more intense way of seeing, but it's also, of course, very partial. Again, this is a cliché, but visual art teaches us how to see. Photography teaches me how to see. When I'm teaching, I'm critical of my students' work when it doesn't show me how they see. The best photographs show us the artist's vision, her take on life, the way he organizes***

***the world visually. This is the great pleasure of photography, that I am able to experience the senses of another person.***

What would you suggest to a young artist in order to emerge?

What will be the photography of the future? Which direction (or multiple directions) do you think that artists are going to explore the most?

***JW: Well obviously I think digital technology will have a huge impact on photographs. I can't really say what the future's going to hold. Perhaps the ubiquitousness of electronic images will make the photographic print more special. Michael Fried had an interesting idea about the essentials of photography. He said that there are essential photographic qualities but paradoxically, these essences keep changing. It's as if each generation discovers something new and foundational about photography. It's as if the elements of photography are constantly being discovered, like new elements in the periodic table.***